

# NEWS

from



**Bill Postmus**

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## **Supervisors Approve Postmus' Plan to Increase Fire Protection in High Desert**

*Half-Million-Dollar Funding Increase to Expand Service at Daggett, Spring Valley Lake and Oak Hills*

SAN BERNARDINO—The San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors today unanimously approved a proposal by First District Supervisor Bill Postmus to expand fire protection in the High Desert, and doubling the County's General Fund support for fire and emergency services along the vast Interstate 15 and I-40 traffic corridors.

Today's action, taken as part of the Board of Supervisors' Mid-Year Budget Review, authorizes an annual contribution of \$200,000 to help recover costs of providing emergency and fire services along the highway corridors and specifically enhancing fire service in Spring Valley Lake and Oak Hills.

The Board also approved an annual contribution of \$300,000 for a new fire station at the County's Barstow-Daggett Airport, which Postmus has proposed along with Brigadier General James D. Thurman, Commanding General of the National Training Center at Fort Irwin. The full-time station would be jointly funded by the County and the U.S. Army. In addition to providing protection to Army helicopters operating from the Airport, the facility would provide emergency services to the increasingly traveled I-15 and I-40 corridors.

Until today, the County provided an annual General Fund contribution of \$500,000 to the County Fire Department for support of these areas. The areas are described as "un-funded" because most of the lands adjacent to these traffic corridors are federally

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owned and generate no property taxes to pay for county services such as fire protection. However, Postmus said, this funding has been inadequate to cover the high number of traffic accident and fire calls in these areas. Several County Fire stations spend significant resources responding outside their district boundaries. Last year alone, four North Desert stations plus the Needles and Big River stations made more than 2,000 calls into the un-funded areas costing an estimated \$820,000.

“Today’s action effectively doubles the annual General Fund contribution to fire protection in the un-funded desert areas from \$500,000 to \$1 million,” Postmus said.

In addition to freeing-up funds to allow increased service to other areas by partially reimbursing local districts for calls outside their areas, the Board in its action also authorized seven new firefighter positions, including two full-time firefighter positions and a fire captain at Spring Valley Lake (at an annual cost of \$150,000) and four part-time firefighter positions at the Oak Hills station (at an annual cost of \$50,000).

Postmus said basic fairness demanded the increases to Spring Valley Lake and Oak Hills. “By having to subsidize the costs of responding to the un-funded areas, these communities were losing resources that could have been used to improve their own service,” Postmus said. For example, he said, “Spring Valley Lake’s Station 22 is currently staffed by ‘paid-call’ firefighters ten hours a day, seven days a week. We have seen that this coverage is no longer adequate—that it needs to go to 24-hour coverage, and now we’re finally doing it.”

Postmus stressed the importance of allowing local taxpayers to keep as much of their local fire taxes as possible going toward their own local service. “For many years the fire taxes generated by property owners at Spring Valley Lake have far exceeded their own local fire service costs,” Postmus said. He estimated that only 42 percent of Spring Valley Lake’s taxes were budgeted this year to go to their own local service at Station 22. “Fifty-eight percent of Spring Valley Lake’s fire taxes--\$415,000 out of a total of \$670,000--were being spent this year to help cover service in other areas,” he said. “I have believed from day one that this must change, and today we made a substantial move in that direction.”

In addition to Spring Valley Lake, Postmus added, the area that loses the second highest percentage of its local dollars to other areas has been Oak Hills (Station 40). “Currently Oak Hills operates strictly on a paid-call basis, but covering inadequate hours,” Postmus said. “As traffic on I-15 near the Cajon Pass continues to increase, the need for greater staffing has become critical. However, this year Oak Hills was expected to generate \$416,000 in fire taxes while more than half--\$247,000 —was destined to go to other areas, until today.”

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Postmus said the increase in fire service funding is especially welcome considering the federal government's imminent approval of the transportation of nuclear waste through San Bernardino County for disposal at Yucca Mountain, Nevada. Also, Governor Davis has proposed closing the Cornell Correctional Facility, a private prison in Baker, which could affect fire service in the area by eliminating the availability of inmate crews currently under contract with County Fire to help fight fires and respond to emergencies.

The Supervisor said his efforts to get the increased funds approved by the Board were bolstered by an unexpected increase the County received this year in an annual federal payment known as "Payment in Lieu of Taxes" (PILT). Since 1976 the County has received these payments from the federal government. The payments partially offset the tax revenues lost by the county as a result of vast federal land ownership and acquisitions within the County. For the past six years the payment has amounted to approximately \$1 million annually. This year the payment increased to \$1,433,507.

"Since a substantial majority of the federal lands are located in the remote desert areas of the County, it is my belief that the PILT funds should be used as a dedicated source of funding for fire and emergency services along the desert highway corridors," Postmus said. He added that the County is continuing to advocate for increases to PILT funding at the federal level, and that he will be traveling to Washington, D.C., during February as part of his continuing effort to do so.